

FOR THEIR ROCK IS NOT AS OUR ROCK: THE GOSPEL AS THE
“SUBVERSIVE FULFILLMENT” OF THE RELIGIOUS OTHER

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I. INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of *fides quaerens intellectum*, what are non-Christian religions?¹ This seemingly crude and almost child-like inquisition encapsulates *a*, and perhaps *the*, major preoccupation of the “theology of religions.” Evangelical scholarship in the last twenty-five years has largely focused on all matters soteriological, debates to which I myself have contributed.² While such work has been vitally necessary, an unintended consequence has been that positive theological construction has been stymied: we may be clear on what other religions are *not*, but we are still unclear as to what exactly they *are*. Out of what are they fashioned?

In the recently published *Only One Way? Three Christian Responses to the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic World*,³ I enter into a critical ecumenical dialogue with the Catholic Gavin D’Costa and the pluralist Paul Knitter, outlining and defending an evangelical and Reformed theology of religions from within my own multicultural British context. Drawing from that work, but now for an intra-evangelical context, this paper seeks to further unpack my definition of non-Christian religions as:

sovereignly directed, variegated and dynamic human idolatrous distortions of divine revelation behind which evidence demonic deception. Being antithetically against yet parasitically dependent upon the truth of the Christian worldview, non-Christian religions are “subversively fulfilled” in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Such a definition does not claim to be original but is no more than a particular instantiation of the complex anthropological mix that is *homo adorans* which historically Reformed theology has attempted to articulate and which seeks to do justice to the Bible’s “canonically limited polyphony”⁴ regarding the religious Other. This pre-prepared tradition-specific “ingredient” is perhaps best contained, explained and resolved by recognizing humanities “religious” response and reinterpretation to God’s revelation of himself. The Bible describes this conceptually using the pervasive category of “idolatry.” The Reformed dynamic of a subjective

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² Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001); idem, “General Revelation: Sufficient or Unsufficient,” in *Faith Comes By Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism* (ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson; Nottingham: Apollos, 2008).

³ SCM, 2011.

⁴ Timothy Ward, “The Diversity and Sufficiency of Scripture,” in *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture* (ed. Paul Helm and Carl Trueman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 218.

idolatrous response of suppression and substitution to an objective divine revelation is famously summarized in passages such as Rom 1:18–32 but is evidenced throughout the entire biblical plot line and so serves as the “grammar” of my articulation.

This paper is in three parts, each reflecting a facet of my definition. First, I will describe the antithetical nature of the religious Other. Second, I will note the pseudo-similarity of the religious Other compared to true revelation. And third, I attempt to show how this description paves the way for a particular relational dynamic between the religious Other and the gospel of Jesus Christ which, borrowing Hendrik Kraemer’s term, I have called “subversive fulfilment.”

II. DEFINING THE RELIGIOUS “OTHER” AS IDOLATROUS, INTERPRETS THEM AS ANTI-THETICAL DISTORTIONS AND DISPLACEMENTS OF DIVINE REVELATION

1. *The Fall as “false faith.”* Scripture attests to an extreme opposition or “antithesis” within humanity, a conflictual relationship between those who have “truth faith” and those who have “false faith” in the Living God of the Bible. We need go no further than Genesis 1–3 to illustrate this point.

If the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 testify to both God’s sovereign effectiveness (“it was so”), and his benevolence (it “was good” and “very good”), then Genesis 3 witnesses an act of de-creation: God is portrayed as *not* being benevolent (he is actuated by envy); God’s words are claimed to be neither truthful nor effective (“you will not die”). Ovey notes here that this belief dimension has two aspects, a “disbelief” or denial of who God is, and also a belief in falsehood about him. Here he mentions a small but felicitous phrase by the Reformed Scholastic Francis Turretin, who in his own account of the Fall speaks about Adam and Eve as “engendering a *false faith* from Satan’s lies.”⁵ Ovey comments here:

What this highlights so strikingly is that the distinction is not simply between those who have true faith and those who have not. Rather it is between those who have true faith and those who have false faith. Further, the truth or falsehood of the faith turns not on whether the person has faith is sincere or not, but on whether the belief that person holds is true to the reality of the person of whom he or she believes it.⁶

To have “false faith” is to believe lies about God, lies which are both rationally and ethically unjustified, “both because it treats God as bad when he is shown to be good, and because God is treated as not having legitimate sovereignty when the process of creation shows that he does have such sovereignty, as Adam well knows.”⁷ The decision to follow the serpent’s interpretation of reality is a some-

⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. Jr James T. Dennison; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992) 1:605.

⁶ Michael Ovey, “The Cross, Creation and the Human Predicament,” in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (ed. David Peterson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001) 109.

⁷ *Ibid.* 110.

what irrational blind “leap of faith” given their previous experience of God’s truthfulness, effectiveness, and benevolence, evidenced even in the fact that God’s prohibition was not bare command but a loving warning.⁸

Turretin’s “false faith” reinforces the permanent accountability of creature before Creator, and one that is universal metaphysically (as being in the *imago Dei*), legally (as covenant breakers), and federally (being *in Adam*). The perpetuity of the *imago Dei* means the perpetuity of a personal relationship with the triune God of the Bible. The “religious” aspect of the image, the *sensus divinitatis* or *semen religionis*,⁹ is not merely the capacity we have for relating to, worshipping, obeying/disobeying something or someone we consider ultimate, what we might call a *generic* religiosity, but rather is a *particular* religiosity: our relationship, worship, and obedience/disobedience to the self-contained ontological Trinity, *the Living God* of the Bible. Postlapsarian humanity may have a terribly broken relationship with this God, but it is never a non-existent relationship with this God. Ironically, as Wright points out, it is human “religion” which highlights the breakdown of relationship:

If religion is “man giving account of his relation to God,” it will be in the religious dimension of human life that we would expect to find the clearest evidence of the radical fracture of that relationship. If the immediate response of the fallen Adam in us is to hide from the presence of the living God, what more effective way could there be that through religious activity which gives us the illusion of having met and satisfied him? “Even his religiosity is a subtle escape from God he is afraid and ashamed to meet.”¹⁰

2. “*False faith*” as *idolatry*. Given that this supreme instance of “unfaithfulness” is between the unique self-contained triune God of the Bible and Adam and Eve (God being the only object of “false faith” here), we are able to classify this first human sin as an act of idolatry.¹¹ Idolatry includes both physical and mental creations. Crucially, its scope includes not only *displacements* of the triune God, but also *distortions*.¹²

To illustrate the nature of the idolatrous complex which Rom 1:18–32 describes in terms of suppression and substitution, J. H. Bavinck employs pseudo-pschoanalytic language using the metaphor of dreaming:

This mysterious process of repressing and replacing is difficult, in a certain sense even impossible, to explain clearly. If I would have to do so, I would prefer to use the metaphor of the dream. In a dream, this remarkable phenomenon sometimes emerges, namely that objective and completely real things play a part in it.

⁸ Francis Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1972) 73.

⁹ To use Calvin’s terms.

¹⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, “The Christian and Other Religions: The Biblical Evidence,” *Them* 9/2 (1984) 85. The quotation is from John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975) 69.

¹¹ Indeed, idolatry can be described as *the* sin: “The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgement, is idolatry. For although each single fault retains its own proper feature, ... yet it is marked off under the general account of idolatry” (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*).

¹² And one could further add “denials” noting that atheism is idolatry as believing God does not exist is a supreme instance of “making up” lies about him.

The ticking of an alarm clock, water flowing through a gutter, the light flashing from the headlights of a passing car, the rumbling of a moving train in the distance—in short, all kinds of outside impressions can enter into the consciousness of the dream. Often they assume gigantic proportions in the dream. The monotonous ticking of the alarm clock then become the rhythmic marching of passing soldiers. The flowing gutter water then becomes a mighty waterfall in the middle of a forest. The lights of the car become sharp flashes of lightning. In short, each impression that flows in from the outside world is appropriated, but at the same time it is torn from its real context, hugely distorted, and made the heart of an entirely different chain of ideas. This being the case, we find here the two processes of repressing and replacing in their inner connection. Here the reality is in fact repressed, and yet that repressed reality functions creatively. But what is born out of it is a sheer fantasy, a colorful collection of chaotic images from which the objective elements can only be distinguished with great effort.

With the help of this metaphor, then, I would like to clarify what people do with God's general revelation. That revelation impinges on them and compels them to listen, but it is at the same time pushed down and repressed. And the only aspects of it that remain connected to human consciousness, even while torn from their original context, become the seeds of an entirely different sequence of ideas around which they crystallize. Definite connections exist between general revelation and human religious consciousness, but those connections are extremely complicated because the repressing and replacing actions are inescapably involved in the process.

Simply because the power of repressing and replacing is illustrated so compellingly in the dream, the dream is such an excellent metaphor of all human religion. Calvin talks about "dreamed up gods" with a great deal of emphasis. We are automatically reminded of the words of the prophet Jeremiah here, when he says, "They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship" (Jer 23:27). Truly, paganism is a dream, a fearful and unending dream: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Eph 5:14).¹³

As a result of idolatry's de-creational reversal, we simultaneously pull God down to our level and raise ourselves up to God's level, thus obliterating a fundamental building block of a Christian worldview: the Creator-creature distinction:

Such idolatrous lies falsify a person, obscuring and distorting who the person is. The lie destroys true relationship as humans stop relating to God as he knows himself to be, instead treating him as they have fashioned him. Idolatry strongly expresses human sovereignty, but sovereignty at the expense of true relationship.¹⁴

The consequences of inappropriately relating to God as he has revealed himself to be are severe, and witnessed throughout the remainder of the biblical narrative. It is because of these "lies" being told about him that God's holy and right-

¹³ J. H. Bavinck, *Religiens besef en christelijke geloof* (Kampen: Kok, 1948) 178–79. I thank Professor John Bolt in assisting me in translating sections of this work from the Dutch.

¹⁴ Michael Ovey, "Idolatry and Spiritual Parody: Counterfeit Faith," *Cambridge Papers* 11/1 (2002) 2.

eous wrath is kindled and is “being revealed” from heaven,¹⁵ a foretaste and warning of God’s unrestrained wrath to come. Idols and the religious traditions built on them do not save, but only lead to divine judgment and condemnation. YHWH is jealous for his own name and will not share his glory with another.¹⁶ By human idol worship God is deprived of his glory and humans are deprived of their God. As Ovey notes:

Such idolatrous lies falsify a person, obscuring and distorting who the person is. The lie destroys true relationship as humans stop relating to God as he knows himself to be, instead treating him as they have fashioned him. Idolatry strongly expresses human sovereignty, but sovereignty at the expense of true relationship. God is treated not as a person we encounter (a “Thou” in Martin Buber’s terms), but as an object (an “It”), indeed a plastic, malleable one. Buber writes “The *Thou* meets me.” Imposing identities on other persons risks not “meeting” them—preventing them [from] being a “Thou.” The biblical God reveals he is not infinitely plastic and malleable. To treat him as that involves counterfeit, not true, relationship, with him. The price for being makers of God, albeit attractive, is that the God we make is not real. The true God is hidden, because we attempt to reduce him to an “It” of our choosing. Buber notes: “This selfhood ... steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven.”¹⁷

Idolatry also brings about human disintegration. Idols deceive, and no one stops to consider this deception.¹⁸ As counterfeits, they promise much and mimic divine attributes and actions, but ultimately they only bring disappointment, disillusionment, and destruction, what Chris Wright calls “radical self-harm.”¹⁹

3. *The “radical difference” of the Christian faith.* Consequently despite the plethora of worldviews and religions that exists in the world, one can say that in reality there are only two, antithetically related to one another: those rooted and built up in Christ, and those founded on “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:6–10).

The above analysis means that we must be cautious of speaking about “truth” and “goodness” in other religions. Once again, J. H. Bavinck is helpful here:

Everything depends on what we mean by an element of “truth.” If taken in a vague and general sense, it must be admitted that such elements are found in the non-Christian religions. If taken in a more special and defined meaning, then it will be hardly tenable. All central ideas involved in Christian belief ... are found in most religions, but they are all understood in a fundamentally different sense, and applied in a quite different connection. The deeper one enters into them, the more one grows aware that all is different in non-Christian religions.²⁰

¹⁵ The “being revealed” of Rom 1:8 here is a present passive.

¹⁶ Isa 42:8.

¹⁷ Ovey, “Idolatry and Spiritual Parody: Counterfeit Faith” 3.

¹⁸ This is Isaiah’s complaint in his vicious satire of idol worship in Isa 44:19.

¹⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2006) 172.

²⁰ J. H. Bavinck, “General Revelation and the Non-Christian Religions,” *Free University Quarterly* 4 (1955) 172.

With Kraemer we affirm the “radical difference”²¹ between Christianity and other religions. Religions are hermetically sealed interpretations of reality (worldviews) and as such are incommensurable, defying superficial comparison:

every religion is a living indivisible ... unity of existential apprehension. It is not a series of tenets, dogmas, prescriptions, institutions, practices that can be taken one by one as independent items of religious life, conception or organization, and then can arbitrarily be compared with, and somehow related to, and grafted upon the similar item of another religion. Every part of it—a dogma, a rite, a myth, an institution, a cult—is so vitally related to the whole that it can never be understood in its real function, significance and tendency, as these occur in the reality of life without keeping constantly in mind that vast and living unity of existential apprehension in which this part moves and has its being.²²

This “radical difference” can be broken down into the component parts of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and gospel.

In metaphysics, we are able to delineate the *sui generis* nature of the Christian faith in a number of ways. First, Christianity offers a unique metaphysics. In contrast to other religions, the Christian God reveals himself to be absolutely independent (*a se*) and self-contained, and yet absolutely personal, both transcendent and immanent, both “other to humanity” (we are not like him) and like humanity (we are made in his “image”).²³

As Richard Bauckham has argued, the assertion behind the first command of the Decalogue and the *Shema* is not merely the relative claim of “no other God” meaning “no other God for Israel,” or “no other God for Christians,” but rather *both* the incomparability (none *like* him) and transcendent uniqueness (no *other* God)²⁴ of YHWH and of Jesus Christ who is God incarnate and Lord:

The essential element in what I have called Jewish monotheism, the element that makes it a kind of monotheism, is not the denial of the existence of other “gods,” but an understanding of the uniqueness of YHWH that puts him in a class of his own, a wholly different class from any other heavenly or supernatural beings, even if these are called “gods.” I call this YHWH’s transcendent uniqueness (Mere “uniqueness” can be what distinguishes one member of a class from other members of it. By “transcendent uniqueness” I mean a form of uniqueness that puts YHWH in a class of his own). Especially important for identifying this transcendent uniqueness are statements that distinguish YHWH by means of a unique relationship to the whole of reality: YHWH alone is Creator of all things, whereas all other things are created by him; and YHWH alone

²¹ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938) 300.

²² *Ibid.* 135.

²³ See John M. Frame, “Divine Aseity and Apologetics,” in *Reason and Revelation: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

²⁴ See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006) 82.

is the sovereign Lord of all things, whereas all other things serve or are subject to his universal lordship.²⁵

Commenting on 1 Kgs 8:60, “So that all the peoples of the earth may know that Lord is God; there is no other,” Bauckham writes, “It can surely not mean that all the peoples of the earth will know that YHWH is the only god *for Israel*. What they will recognise is that YHWH alone is ‘the God.’ They need not deny that there are other gods, but they will recognise the uniqueness of YHWH as the only one who can be called ‘the God.’ It is in this category that ‘there is no other.’”²⁶

Concerning both who the triune God is (in terms of metaphysics), what the triune God says (in terms of epistemology and revelation), and what the triune God does (in terms of his sovereignty over both creation and redemption), there is no one like him. Christians are not defending an undefined theism, an impersonal Being, or certain personal beings which are not absolutes. *The only God is the Living God of the Bible, the self-revealing, self-contained ontological Trinity: YHWH.* There is no other reality behind this God. It is this God, or no god. There is either the worship of the uncreated Christian God, or the worship of created idols which are nothing at all.²⁷

Second, such a metaphysic has implications for epistemology. Christians claim that the triune God who is both transcendent and immanent, originally created us to know things truly (because God has revealed himself) but not exhaustively (because we are not God). There is a difference between *archetypal* knowledge (God’s exhaustive knowledge of himself) and *ectypal* knowledge (knowledge God gives us of himself). The triune God is able to speak because he is a personal, rather than impersonal Being. This same God is able to speak authoritatively because he is a personal absolute.

Third, in ethics, again we see a radical difference between Christianity and other religious systems. John Frame classifies (and internally critiques) the ethical approaches of other religions into three broad types: those based on fate; those as self-realization; and those as law without gospel.²⁸ For Frame, the first two options presuppose an impersonal deity which commit the genetic fallacy that “is” equals “ought.” Rather, “the absolute moral standard must be an absolute person.”²⁹ The third category is soteriologically founded upon works-righteousness as opposed to Christianity’s personal God who reveals himself to be the supreme standard of right and wrong and where for the Christian, “good works” are not understood to be a cause of salvation but rather a willing and faithful response to God’s free gift of grace and salvation in the propitiatory death of Christ and his vindicating resurrection from the dead.

²⁵ Richard Bauckham, “Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism,” in Craig Bartholomew et al., eds., *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 211.

²⁶ Bauckham, “Biblical Theology” 195.

²⁷ 1 Cor 8:4.

²⁸ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008) 54–71.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 63.

Finally, we note that distinguishing Christian uniqueness by isolating metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics is somewhat artificial and atomistic. All these separate elements are necessary interconnected strands of a unique and unified system of thought, or more correctly, a unique historical and eschatological story/meta-narrative, which places all humanity within an epic cosmic drama of creation—fall—redemption—consummation with a particular focal point. This history of redemption and redemptive history is thoroughly Christocentric—it is the good news of Jesus Christ which is both the message of Christianity and the heart of the Christian worldview and philosophy.³⁰ It is the transcendent uniqueness of his person and his work that distinguishes Christianity from all other “faiths” and gives Christianity its exclusive or particular claims.

In summary, what is being proposed here is the systemic “all or nothing” and *solus Christus* character of Christianity in matters of both salvation and truth. As Van Til states,

It is accordingly no easier for sinners to accept God’s revelation in nature than to accept God’s revelation in Scripture. They are no more ready of themselves to do the one than to do the other. From the point of the view of the sinner, theism is as objectionable as Christianity. Theism that is worthy of the name is Christian theism. Christ said that no man can come to the Father but by him. No one can become a theist unless he becomes a Christian. Any God that is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not God but an idol. It is therefore the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts that alone effects the required Copernican revolution and makes us both Christians and theists.³¹

III. DEFINING THE RELIGIOUS “OTHER” AS IDOLATROUS, ACKNOWLEDGES THEIR PSEUDO SIMILARITY TO, AND FALSE COUNTERFEITING OF, DIVINE REVELATION

The stark and sombre picture I have sketched so far of the religious Other may seem theologically monochrome, unrealistic, and counter-intuitive, for a *posteriori*, and within our own religiously plural context, adherents of other religions appear to have worldviews which overlap with that of the Christian, often appear to do “good” works, and aspire to common human goals and values. How are we to theologically explain these instances of similarity and commonality between various religious traditions, while still upholding the principle of the antithesis? That is to

³⁰ This is to be contrasted with the many instances of “false faith” in the Son which mirror the de-creation of Genesis 3. As Ovey writes: “For he is the creative Word (Jn 1:1–3), yet the world sees him as untruthful. For example, in Jn 5:18 his claims to be God’s Son are treated as blasphemy, while in John 7:12 some say he is a false teacher. In Genesis 3 God’s word is seen as ineffective: as Son he claims to have life within him (Jn. 5:26) and to be the one who will rise from the dead (Jn. 2:19). Yet the tone of the mockery at the crucifixion (e.g. Mt. 27:39–44 shows a dismissal of Jesus’ words as ineffective.) Further in Genesis 3, God’s goodness is implicitly denied, while in the New Testament Jesus is seen as morally wrong. Finally, of course, in Genesis 3, God’s rightful claims are defied, while in Jesus humanity crucifies its king (Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify you King?” The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but the emperor,’” Jn. 19:15).” Ovey, “Cross, Creation and the Human Predicament” 110–11.

³¹ Cornelius Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium* (ed. Paul Woolley; Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian Publishing, 1946) 280.

say, within an overarching pattern of discontinuity between Christianity and other faiths, can there be elements of continuity also?

First, we remember that complex anthropological mix that makes up *homo adorans*. Although at the principial or “root” level of religious presuppositions, the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian is absolute, the practical and “lived” worldviews built upon these fundamental commitments, are often inconsistent at the level of “fruit.” Within the unbeliever, the theological explanation for this inconsistency is the variegated non-salvific work of the Holy Spirit who in his common grace restrains sin and excites to a civic righteousness. Non-Christians live off the “borrowed capital,” or better steal the “fruit” of the Christian worldview and claim it for their own. Van Til puts it in his own inimitable way:

As the Christian sins against his will, the natural man, “sins against” his own essentially Satanic principle. As the Christian has the incubus of his “old man” weighing him down and therefore keeping him from realizing the “life of Christ” within him, so the natural man has the incubus of the sense of Deity weighing him down and keeping him from realizing the life of Satan within him. The actual situation is therefore always a mix of truth with error. Being “without God in the world” the natural man yet knows God, and, in spite of himself, to some extent recognizes God. By virtue of their creation in God’s image, by virtue of the ineradicable sense of deity within them and by virtue of God’s restraining general grace, those who hate God, yet in a restricted sense know God, and does good.³²

Second, we return to the analytical tool of idols and idolatry. Ironically, understanding other religions in terms of idolatry, *supports* a structural or formal “commonality” between Christianity and other religions. Idols and their worshippers are parasitic and mimic true divine revelation. Given their counterfeit nature, and contrary to certain claims of certain postliberal and postmodern theology of religions, there is still a legitimate sense in which one can speak of religion as a *genus*.

I wish to break down this structural similarity into four categories all of which to a greater or lesser degree are the “revelatory” raw material from which non-Christian religions are idolatrously fashioned: *imaginal* “revelation”; *remnantal* “revelation”; *influential* “revelation”; and *demonical* “revelation.”

1. *Imaginal* “revelation.” In this first category, the revelatory source on which non-Christian religions idolatrously draw is metaphysical, being the *imago Dei* itself. At the Fall while the Living God is replaced by idols, these metaphysical or “structural” categories remain intact and give a certain universal creaturely limitation to religious expression.

For example, all religions and worldviews will have their own *a se* ultimate explanation of everything, but this will often be impersonal rather than personal. Structurally, Van Til compares “true” theophany, prophecy, and miracle with their “false” counterparts. In counterfeit theophanies we see our human need for God to be near and at hand, hence in other religion traditions we often see the appearance

³² Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (ed. William Edgar; 2d ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007) 65.

or visitation of the gods. In counterfeit prophecy, we see our need for the divine communication, hence we often see practices such as divination, and of course Scriptures. In counterfeit miracles, we see our human need for the gods to intervene in times of need.³³

Largely based on his extensive missiological acquaintance with living religious traditions, J. H. Bavinck goes into much more phenomenological detail here, putting forward a morphology of religious consciousness: what might be called a theological comparative religions. Following Witte,³⁴ Bavinck distinguishes between the “*thatness*” and “*whatness*” of humanity’s religious quest. The *thatness* refers to a universal “basal consciousness”³⁵ and provides a form and structure. These are the perennial questions which humans ask. The *whatness* consists of the answers given to these questions “the manner in which people interpret and give substantive form to this consciousness.” While in non-Christian religions the *whatness* is always the radical difference of idolatrous response, the *thatness* remains constant both in true religion and false religion.

Concerning this *thatness*, Bavinck, discerns “a sort of framework within which the religious thought of humankind must move There appear to be certain intersections around which all sorts of ideas crystallize ... [or] magnetic points [in the form of primal questions] to which the religious thinking of mankind is irresistibly attracted.”³⁶ Humans are limited by their human beingness:

If only man could shed his self-being, his individuality, his sense of royalty; if only he could let himself sink down to the level of a plant or an animal without norms or morals! But he cannot do that. He is man, bearer of a name at once unutterably noble and desperately pathetic.³⁷

In several of his writings, Bavinck delineates five such interconnected “magnetic points” and takes time to describe in detail each point and how they manifest themselves in religious traditions.

In “*I and the cosmos*” we are confronted with human responses to “a sense of belonging to the whole,” and questions that concern “the place of man in the totality of the universe.”³⁸ In “*I and the norm*” we are confronted with a sense of transcendent norms to which we are subjected and under which we struggle for freedom. In “*I and the riddle of my existence*” there is experienced “[a] sense of the governance of existence by a providential or destining power.” Humans are active doers and passive victims, they lead but they also undergo their lives.” In “*I and salvation*” there is the recognition of a need for redemption, that something somewhere has gone wrong and that deliverance is needed, “man has that remarkable tendency not

³³ See *ibid.* 204–5.

³⁴ J. Witte, *Die Christus-Botschaft und die Religionen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1936), 37ff., quoted in Paul Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck (1895–1964)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003) 171.

³⁵ Visser, *Heart for the Gospel* 171.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 157.

³⁷ Bavinck, *Religieuze besef en christelijk geloof*: 166. Translated and quoted in Visser, *Heart for the Gospel* 158.

³⁸ J. H. Bavinck, *The Church between Temple and Mosque* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 38.

to accept reality as it presents itself to him, but he always dreams of the better world in which life will be healthy and safe.”³⁹ Finally, in “*I and the Supreme Power*” we have “the reality behind the reality,”⁴⁰ a sense of relatedness to a Superior or Supreme Power.

2. *Remnantal “revelation.”* Although some theologians place it under the category of “general” revelation, and others “special” revelation, as well as the ever-present dynamic revelation of God in nature and the *imago Dei*, there is an historical “remnantal” revelation within religious traditions:

All peoples have kept some recognisable memory of what happened in Paradise, be it ever so distorted. In particular, those people that we usually call primitive have numerous myths telling of a glorious primeval age in which god and men had free intercourse. And according to the myths this blessed period was finished by some blunder or accident. It is plain that human guilt is reasoned away, or at least smothered over in all these myths. But it is equally plain that something of the common memory of the things that are related to these first few chapters of Genesis is kept alive by all peoples. So, considering non-Christian religions, we are not only confronted with general revelations, but also with memories of God’s revelation in the remotest history of man.⁴¹

Though entropically distorted over time through, for example, the mechanisms of etymology or euhemerism, remnantal revelation gives us a comparative theological explanation of “commonalities” and “continuities” between religious traditions, for example, certain events, themes and archetypes. As well as biblical and theological support for this revelation, the historical traditions of the *prisca theologia* and comparative mythology, together with certain anthropologists in the history of religions, especially Wilhelm Schmidt and his espousal of “original monotheism,” lend extrabiblical support to this remnantal category.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Bavink, “General Revelation and the Non-Christian Religions” 51. There are others who support this thesis, such as Corduan: “The picture, then, is this: Religious belief began with the first humans and religious cultus soon thereafter with Enosh, the son of Seth, as mentioned in Genesis 4:26. As the human race expanded, contracted drastically at the flood, and then expanded again, the beliefs and practices did not slip from the collective memory but retained a presence within the tribes least affected by cultural development. There it was (rightly) attributed to some form of divine self-disclosure, but also (rightly) reinforced by the question, Who made it? Finally, one sees evidence of this pattern even in the more highly developed religious cultures insofar as one can find a monotheism at many of their roots. The continuity of monotheism is based on an original special revelation and reinforced by general revelation.” Winfried Corduan, *The Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 42. Interestingly, W. G. T. Shedd in his classic systematic theology proposes a similar thesis: “The relics of monotheism found outside the pale of revelation, in various countries and civilizations, are traceable to two sources: 1) to the monotheistic structure of the human mind, ... this is the subjective and fundamental requisite; and 2) to the influence of the primitive revelation from God made in the line of Seth, fragments of which have floated down among the races of mankind. Both of these sources and causes of monotheism should be recognized. If only the first is acknowledged, justice is not done to the traditional records and data. If only the second is acknowledged and all monotheism in human history is referred to a special revelation in early times, justice is not done to the constitution of the human mind. It conflicts moreover, with St Paul’s representation in Romans 1.” William G. T. Shedd and Alan W. Gomes, *Dogmatic Theology* (3d ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003) 197.

3. *Influential "revelation."* Closely related to the concept of *remnantal* revelation is that of *influential* revelation, by which I am referring to the impact or "influent" of the Judeo-Christian worldview on living religious traditions, both historically and presently. The idea that pagans plagiarized earlier Israelite sources was a foundational apologetic building block in many of the early Christian Fathers, for example Tatian and Justin.⁴² More recently some scholars have posited a similar position. The evidence that Mohammed encountered some form of Nestorian Christianity is strong. J. H. Bavinck speaks of the gospel penetrating India and notes the influence this may have had on grace and bhakti traditions within Hinduism:

If we were asked whether the rise of the idea of grace as the way of salvation, which is traceable in Hinduism and Buddhism, may be considered as a result of the permeating power of the Christian message, we could not give an answer. But one thing seems to be sure: here and there, now and then, Christian ideas penetrated other religions, melted into them, and became one with them. These ideas could not preserve their original purity. They were frequently adjusted to the main current of the other religions. Often they were mutilated, stained, and polluted. But the question rises if it was possible to deprive them absolutely of their original strength. God's way with the Gentile nations is a very mysterious one.⁴³

4. *Demonical "revelation."* In constructing a theology of religions it would be remiss *not* to include some reference to the role of the demonic, what Kraemer ominously calls a "dark margin."⁴⁴ Concerning the precise relationship between demons and idols in passages such as Deut 32:17 and 1 Cor 10:20 some of the most detailed recent work has been done by Mody who proffers what he calls a "co-optative" view which identifies demons and idols as distinct entities, the personal former standing behind and manipulating the lifeless latter. In describing this co-option, Mody notes three inter-connected features.

First, "the demons are powerful and may enslave humanity into idolatry."⁴⁵ This recognizes a dangerous combination which brings together a certain spiritual power and authority which demons have, with the inherent human propensity to worship idols. Although cult images are lifeless and nothing, worshipping them puts the worshipper in the sphere of influence of demons, hence Paul's insistence for Christians to dissociate themselves with such practices.

Second, "the demons deceive humanity into sacrifices to idols."⁴⁶ For Mody, this deception can occur in various ways: the demons' counterfeiting can deceive

⁴² See Gerald Bray, "Explaining Christianity to Pagans: The Second Century Apologists," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997). Bray himself questions the validity of this pursuit.

⁴³ J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 106.

⁴⁴ Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth, 1956) 379.

⁴⁵ Rohintan Mody, *Evil and Empty: The Worship of Other Faiths in 1 Corinthians 10:18–22 and Today* (Latimer Studies 71; London: The Latimer Trust, 2010) 25.

⁴⁶ Rohintan Mody, "The Relationship Between Powers of Evil and Idols in 1 Corinthians 8:4–5 and 10:18–22 in the Context of the Pauline Corpus and Early Judaism" (Ph.D. diss., Aberdeen University, 2008) 277.

idolaters into believing in the spiritual reality of idols and therefore lead them away from God; the idols themselves are deceptive and illusory; and paralleling Paul's remarks in 2 Cor 11:13–15a, “the demons may disguise themselves and appear to be a real god, worthy of worship.”⁴⁷

Finally, “the demons ‘stand behind’ the idols and co-opt the worship consciously intended for the idols.”⁴⁸ Mody's argument here is that through their deception, demons co-opt the worship and sacrifices intended for the idols, and thereby bringing the idolater under a demonic sphere of influence.

IV. DEFINING THE RELIGIOUS “OTHER” AS IDOLATROUS, INTERPRETS THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST AS BEING THEIR “SUBVERSIVE FULFILLMENT”

After much preparation, we are now finally in a position to describe the overall relationship between the revelation of the Christian gospel of Jesus Christ and the idolatrous response that is the religious Other. Given what we have already said concerning elements of both discontinuity and continuity between counterfeits and the reality upon which they are based, the relationship will be complex and sophisticated, teetering on the brink of the dialectical and paradoxical, but not I believe falling into either of these categories. The term that I believe most accurately and succinctly describes this particular relationship is that of “subversive fulfillment,” a phrase used by Hendrik Kraemer, seemingly only once, in an essay he wrote in 1939, an essay which served as a further explanation and elaboration of his book *The Non-Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*:

This apprehension of the essential “otherness” of the world of divine realities revealed in Jesus Christ from the atmosphere of religion as we know it in the history of the race, cannot be grasped merely by way of investigation and reasoning. Only an attentive study of the Bible can open the eyes to the fact that Christ, “the power of God” and “the wisdom of God” stands in contradiction to the power and wisdom of man. Perhaps in some respects it is proper to speak of contradictory or *subversive fulfillment*.⁴⁹

What does the term “subversive fulfillment” convey? Let us spend a few moments focusing on both parts of this phrase.

1. *The gospel as subversion*. On the one hand, the gospel of Jesus Christ stands as the subversive and antithetical contradiction, confrontation, condemnation, and crisis of all manifestations of the religious Other. The universal sinful suppression

⁴⁷ In his recent study, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*, Jeffrey Niehaus explores the close parallels, both in terms of substance and structure, between the OT and ancient Near Eastern religion. His very brief, indeed too brief, explanation for such parallels is that of *demonic counterfeiting*, “Passages such as Deuteronomy 32:16–19; 1 Corinthians 10:20; 1 Timothy 4:1 tell us clearly enough that demonic powers and intelligences are behind false religion, . . . Demonic inspiration of false religion . . . is one of the things the Bible teaches clearly.” Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008) 179.

⁴⁸ Mody, *Evil and Empty: The Worship of Other Faiths in 1 Corinthians 10:18–22 and Today* 30.

⁴⁹ Hendrik Kraemer, “Continuity or Discontinuity,” in *The Authority of Faith: International Missionary Council Meeting at Tambaram, Madras* (ed. G. Paton; London: Oxford University Press, 1939) 5.

and substitution of our knowledge of God, the “whatness” of religion, means that even the most contextualized communication of the gospel (e.g. Paul’s Areopagus address in Acts 17) must issue in an appeal, a call for repentance (Acts 17:30), a turning from idols to the living and true God.⁵⁰ J. H. Bavinck captures this perspective well, and it is worth quoting him at length here:

The gods of heathen worship are not God, but the product of human imagination. The concept of grace which is to be found here and there is not the grace of god, but it is as a blade of straw that is grasped in desperation and misery. The redeemers and saviours about whom heathendom dreams are not types of what Christ is and would be but they are saviours conjured by the fancy of men. Such evidence the need of the man who has lost God.

Such altars, dedicated to the “unknown god” are the cries of distress of a heart torn loose from God, a heart with no inner resting. Such manifestations are not to be understood as in any way pointing to the real Christ. The real Christ differs radically from the so-called saviours conjured up by the religions of man. His gospel is not the answer to man’s inquiry, but in a deep and profound sense the gospel of Christ is rather a condemnation of all such human fancy and speculation. Consequently, if we begin with the ideas of those we would convert, a point will be reached when the breach between our view and theirs is clearly evident. There is no direct uninterrupted path from the darkness of paganism to the light of the gospel. Pagan systems of thought can be examined and humanly speaking, their beauty, inner consistency, scope, and systematic character can even be admired to a degree, but somewhere along the line, we must pause to point out our tremendous differences. Without that, our garment is not finished and it may even be dangerous and misleading. There is no detour that can bridge the gap; the transition from paganism to Christianity is not continuous and smooth, and it would be dishonest and unfaithful to Christ if it were to try to camouflage the gulf separating the two.⁵¹

2. *The gospel as fulfillment.* However, while the gospel is an appeal, it is also appealing, “No continuity exists between the gospel and human religious consciousness, although definite continuity does exist between the gospel and what lies behind human religious consciousness, namely God’s general revelation.”⁵² There is some relationship between the disastrous dream and glorious reality. Because we are metaphysically all made in God’s image, because of God’s variegated common grace which restrains the depth of our suppression and substitution, because idols are parasites and counterfeits of *the* God—YHWH, there is a “*thatness*” to our humanity. Perennial metaphysical, epistemological ethical questions which other religions all ask but cannot ultimately answer, *are* answered by the self-contained ontological triune Creator and Savior. Philosophically speaking, Christianity is true because of the impossibility of the contrary. Biblically speaking, the cracked cisterns of idolatry which bring only disillusionment, despair, and unfulfilled desires are wonderfully fulfilled and surpassed in the fount of Living Water, Jesus Christ the LORD. Having described his five “magnetic points” which provide the structure

⁵⁰ Cf. 1 Thess 1:9.

⁵¹ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (trans. David H. Freeman; Phillipsburg: P&R, 1960) 136–37.

⁵² Bavinck, *Religijs besef en christelijk geloof* 188.

and “thatness” of religious consciousness, Bavinck is able to describe how the gospel of Jesus Christ answers these perennial questions by showing that the kingdom of God “embraces everything and is the meaningful coherence that stuffed-full people have been dreaming about for centuries. But it is different from what they thought it was.”⁵³

I and Cosmos emphasized universal being as god, the goal being a self-deifying denial of egos and delusions “in order to be able to enter the divine state of the all.”⁵⁴ Jesus’ kingdom comes as something completely different with its realised eschatology of now and not-yet, of a world perishing and under vanity, of “finding oneself anew in resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵⁵

In *I and the norm*, human life is associated with law, but a law often impersonalized and wrestled with. As Bavinck says, “in Jesus this is different”:

Transgression of the law is not an assault on good order or agreement, but it is very definitely rebellion against God and an attempt to pry oneself loose from God’s grip and to attack his image of god. That law is Jesus Christ, in whom the entire law is fulfilled and who kept every commandment in our place out of the depths of his divine love. The living reality of that Someone, that God, always stands behind the law. Our lives find fullness and meaning in fellowship with that God, and outside of him safety is nowhere and never found.⁵⁶

In *I and riddle of my existence*, we see the “a wonderful interplay of fate and activity”⁵⁷ seen in karma and *takdir*. In the gospel, both of these aspects are personalized and understood as both human accountability together with a divine plan, “the lot that is assigned a person is not some dark fate nor is it a cosmic determinism. But in its deepest sense it is the unfolding plan of God. The dialogue that a person experiences between his or her activity and his or her destiny increasingly takes on the character of a dialogue between a child and its father.”⁵⁸

In *I and salvation*, we see the perennial cry for deliverance and liberation from all manner of threats both natural and supernatural. Again, salvation in Christ is radically different:

There is but one thing from which people must be saved, and that is their guilt before him whom they attempt to push away all the time in their pursuit of unrighteousness. It is salvation from enmity and from being lost. That salvation included all other forms of being made free, like kernel on the ear. It is only imaginable as a whole, with all its dimensions growing from one root.⁵⁹

Finally, in *I and the Supreme power*, humanity recognizes its relatedness to a higher power, but in the process of suppression and exchange, this higher power has been fashioned in man’s image. In the gospel, this higher power is revealed as a Father and a King, and comes to us, “that Higher power is the one that came into

⁵³ Ibid. 181.

⁵⁴ Ibid .

⁵⁵ Ibid. 183.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 184.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 185.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 186.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 185.

the world in the form of Jesus Christ and removed the veil over his face so that we might know the Son and Father.”⁶⁰

V. CONCLUSION

Having briefly sketched the nature of the religious Other and the relationship of the gospel to it, I offer some concluding remarks.

First, I have been upfront in declaring the tradition-specific nature of my theology of religions. One sometimes gets the impression that both factual and cherished religious pluralism *obligate* us to conceive of new doctrines and even new theological methods, as if one’s previous methods and doctrines were somehow ill-equipped to answer the questions at hand. However, it is my contention that deeply sunk and cherished theological, epistemological and anthropological foundations should not be ignored or worse “dug up” when faced with the religious Other. Rather, it is on these secure foundations that one should build one’s theology of religions. *We need not, indeed should not, generate a Copernican revolution.*

Second, and in a similar vein, I am not embarrassed to admit my indebtedness to certain neglected Reformed missiologists on whose shoulders I sit and whom I wish to steer back into the limelight. J. H. Bavinck’s *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* and Kraemer’s *Religion and the Christian Faith* are now more than half a century old. In the intervening years, the world has changed beyond recognition as have missiological studies. And yet, in 2011 when it comes to a perennial issue such as contextualization, time and again, I find myself returning to their analyses, for they offer a firm, nuanced, and biblically faithful “theology of religions” with which to underpin their missiological praxis (e.g. Bavinck’s model of *possessio*). In an evangelical world where both extractionism and syncretism are still ever-present dangers, it is my contention that the model we have called “subversive fulfilment” best encapsulates not only the relationship between the gospel and formal religion and religions, but more generally the gospel and every human culture. Somewhat provocatively, I would argue that the missiological effectiveness and faithfulness of someone like Tim Keller consists not in his originality but rather in his connection to those from whom he learned, for example, Harvie Conn whose main influence was J. H. Bavinck.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Keller’s approach to contextualization is very much a “subversive fulfilment” approach. For example, take what I think is a typical Keller statement: “Contextualising is not telling people what they want to hear but entering in and in some ways affirming their world (because there will be aspects of it that are God glorifying) while at the same time challenging their presuppositions ... bringing the Gospel to bear on their inconsistencies. Paul did this in 1 Cor 1 recognising how the Gospel affects different people (Jews and Greeks) in different ways. Jews and Greeks have different baseline narratives (Jews = power, Greek = philosophy) and he engaged with them in different ways contextualising his message to suit. The cross offends differently according to different cultures/worldviews ... we need to be aware of this and we need to address those different contexts appropriately. This is where the affirmation and challenge must be held together—we take and challenge cultural idols but in Jesus Christ we point them to the true answer to their true longing. Affirm what they believe where it is consistent with a Christ-centred worldview but GO FOR their idols as well. If we over adapt we join them in idolatry, if we

Third, I recognize that what I have offered here is an abstract dogmatic outline of the Religious Other rather than the theology of a particular religious tradition. What is needed more than ever is evangelical scholars committed to “theological religious studies” who will engage in detailed cross-disciplinary phenomenological research of particular religions tracing, for example, the impact of remnantal and influential revelation.

Finally, it is imperative that our cultured despisers are offended by the gospel message rather than the gospel messenger; that we recognize the demonic without demonizing; that our pronouncements do not give rise to the charge of the sins of malice or vain-glory; and that the context for our engagement with religious traditions is one of grace. First, what is needed is a constant acknowledgement that we ourselves have been saved by grace through faith and not because of any ethical or intellectual superiority. Second, we need an attitude of grace toward those amongst whom we are ministering. J. H. Bavinck calls this a meeting-in-love:

Meeting-in-love includes the recognition of myself in the other person, a sympathetic feeling of his guilt and a sincere desire in Christ to do with this man what Christ has done with me. This is the meaning of that tremendous word of Peter “that ye should show forth the praises of him that has called you out of darkness out of which Christ has called me.” In the proper approach there is always an awareness of being on the same level with a person and there is a real consciousness of our common guilt in the eyes of God. It is this which gives the approach a warm undertone.⁶²

under adapt (or not at all) we buy into our own idols (because we prioritise forms/attitudes over lost people” (transcription of talk given at Oak Hill College, London, 2009).

⁶² Bavinck, *Introduction to the Science of Missions* 126.